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Feds say Oregon not protecting coastal waters from logging

Created on Monday, 02 February 2015 10:01 | Written by [Jes Burns](#), [EarthFix](#) |

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Federal regulators say Oregon is not doing enough to protect water quality in coastal areas. A ruling Friday on the state's coastal nonpoint pollution control could end up costing the state millions.

More than 15 years ago, the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration told Oregon officials that they needed to tighten regulations on non-point source, or runoff-related, pollution. Nonpoint pollution comes from a broad range of human activities, including agriculture, grazing, urban development and forestry.

Specifically, officials said Oregon regulations on urban, septic systems and logging runoff needed work. Over the years some changes happened, but not enough.

Now federal officials say Oregon's logging rules still don't do enough to protect fish habitat and drinking water.

"We have concerns that extend beyond the disapproval points that the federal agencies made today," says Nina Bell of Northwest Environmental Advocates, which sued the EPA and NOAA in 2009 to force a ruling on Oregon's plan. "But we agree strongly what the federal agencies did say."

The plan disapproval cited four forestry-specific areas that need to be addressed:

- Protecting small- and medium-sized streams. This could include increasing logging buffer zones in these riparian areas and treating non-fish-bearing streams the same as those with fish. One objective of increased protections is to maintain enough shade to keep water temperatures at levels healthy for fish downstream.
- Addressing runoff from logging roads, including older "legacy" roads. Erosion of unmaintained logging roads can cause significant sedimentation problems in streams, harming salmon habitat. Oregon currently has a voluntary compliance program to ensure impacts are curbed, but the EPA says the state doesn't have a sufficient monitoring or tracking program to ensure the voluntary efforts are working.
- Protecting waterways from landslides. Landslides can severely impair water quality. As above, voluntary compliance measures are not tracked. In addition, logging-related landslide deterrence is managed to prevent loss of human life and property, not impacts on water quality.
- Minimizing forestry-related pesticides' impact on streams. Pesticide run-off from logging activities can harm fish and impair drinking water for communities downstream. EPA suggests effects can be limited with an increase in no-cut buffer zones, especially on non-fish bearing streams.

Oregon Department of Forestry spokesman Dan Postrel says state is continuing to work on these issues.

"We are definitely continuing to evolve the Forest Practices Act as we have for 40-some years," he says.

Postrel cites current work by the state forestry board to reevaluate stream shade practices. For the other issues, the state stands by the effectiveness of voluntary measures.

With the disapproval of Oregon's pollution control plan comes consequence — financial in nature. As soon as July 2015, the government can begin cutting the amount of federal grant funds available to the state. That reduction could be as much as \$1.3 million the first year, according to Northwest Environmental Advocates.

"Presumably, Oregon also feels humiliated because it's the first state in the country to have its program disapproved," Bell says.

Washington has not yet had its coastal pollution plan approved. Bell says the state is still negotiating over rules for agricultural run-off.


Bell says farm pollution could soon become an issue of contention between federal regulators and the state of Oregon as well.



Photo Credit: JES BURNS, COURTESY OF EARTHFIX - The South Slough of Coos Bay is one of many of Oregon's coastal waters affected by nonpoint source runoff.

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